

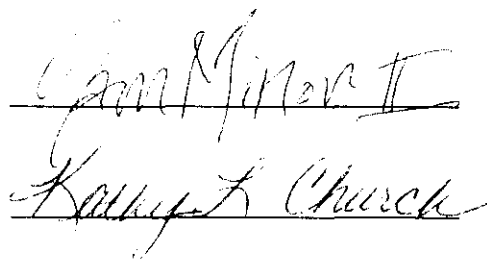
Leonard and Alberto: A Children's Book

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The first signature, "Sam Minor II", is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line. The second signature, "Kathy Church", is also in cursive and is positioned below the first signature, also above a horizontal line.

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary project combines the knowledge and skills of an early childhood education major and a graphic design major in the production of a piece of quality children's literature. The story is a narrative poem about the adventures of a lizard and a toad. The text and illustrations incorporate knowledge of children's literacy and language development and also the basic elements of page layout and design.

Collaboration between the author and the illustrator was needed during the entire process in order to create a unified, developmentally appropriate book for children ranging from preschool age to third grade.

Educational Aspects

A professor once said to my class, “Doing worksheets in school prepares a student emotionally to do worksheets in life.” I could not agree with him more on this statement, and in structuring my own lessons plans and thinking in a way that strays away from this old method of worksheet-based learning, I have been able to focus my efforts more on providing the children who I have taught with real experiences that are meaningful and applicable to their lives. When I decided to write a children’s book for this thesis, I based my decision on how important I think using genuine, high quality literature in the classroom is and how much it enhances the attitudes towards learning in students.

I was inspired to create this book because of my great interest in providing children with meaningful experiences in school, and especially because of my awareness of how children learn, develop, and grow. The area of literacy and language development has always been one that has intrigued me, and creating this book was a fantastic way to apply what I know about these areas of education to something that will be useful to me in the future in my own classroom.

As I have learned more about these particular areas, I have been presented with research done on the literacy and language development of young children. Much of this research has shown how important literary experiences are both before and after children begin school (Huck 9). Giving children a head start by reading with them at an early age from a large variety of books can greatly influence their oral language development and also can greatly affect their disposition about reading in general. When children are able to have these early experiences with books and reading, their accomplishments when learning to read are influenced in a positive way. Likewise, if children are not given the

opportunity to become familiar with literature before beginning school, their ability to begin the reading process can be negatively affected, and they may lag behind their classmates in regards to their reading successes (NAEYC 11).

Our story could easily be used to provide these necessary before, during, and after school experiences. Using our story in reading activities and experiences can be appropriate with a large variation of ages, depending on how it is used. To introduce this book to preschool and Kindergarten age students, the reader (a teacher or another adult) would have to use a very animated and excited voice when reading to convey the tone of the story. Since the size of the book is so small, lap reading or small group reading would be ideal for this age group. While reading, the adult could use their hands and fingers to point along with the text as they read, then move their fingers gently towards the illustrations to make a smooth connection between the text and illustrations. The purpose of this book for children this young would mainly be to introduce them to a fun and interesting story that might grab their interest, give them a good oral vocabulary model, and help them to develop a love of reading.

If this story were brought into primary grades, it would still have the effect of being fun, exciting, and interesting to the students, but could also be used as a tool to develop reader awareness of sounds, concepts and parts of a story (story grammar), word patterns and rhymes, and could also illustrate to the children the connection between word and picture. At emergent or early reading levels (first grade and possibly early second grade), this book would probably be too difficult for children to read independently, but for them to be read to or even to read parts of the book with the teacher would begin the bridge to a higher level of reading skills. In second and third

grades, this book would be at a good level for independent reading, and would continue to reinforce the strategies and skills that young readers spend so much time developing in the primary grades.

Most importantly, I believe that this book and books similar to it could really help in raising the level of reading enjoyment and could build a more positive view of reading and writing in those students who have difficulties. By reading this story, or by having it read to them, these students might forget at least momentarily that they dislike reading! To me, this is one of the most important steps in helping young readers succeed, because if they do not wish to achieve, chances are that they will continue to fall further and further behind their classmates. Building their experiences with enjoyable and meaningful stories and activities could greatly improve their chances at success.

When choosing the quality literature that influences these children so much, many people believe that it is necessary to look for extremely simple texts that will not challenge the children or force them to think above their level of development. Obviously, choosing a chapter book would not be appropriate to read to a group of four-year-olds, but what needs to be considered is that reading books to children that have text that is slightly above their own oral vocabulary level can significantly improve their own language development. As renowned children's author E.B. White once said, "Children love words that give them a hard time, provided they are in a context that absorbs their attention" (Huck 5). Children pick up new words, phrases, and even particular "story language" from favorite books, and also from the adults and more mature readers and speakers around them (NAEYC 104).

In older children that are beginning to learn to read and write, these previous literacy and language experiences can give them ideas, prompts, and inspiration for their own reading and writing endeavors. A fairly standard trait of children of all ages is that their ability to *produce* language is always a step or two behind their ability to *understand* it. Using quality texts that are slightly above the level of language the children can produce gives these young learners the scaffolding to move onto a higher level of understanding and speech (Huck 41). All of these experiences, plus many others from the every day lives of the children, blend with the goals of the literacy and language programs in the United States, which state that children should “expand their ability to communicate through speaking, listening, reading, and writing and to develop the disposition to learn from reading”(NAEYC 172).

The component of these goals that refers to developing a child’s disposition about reading, I believe, is one of the most important aspects of education and needs to begin as soon as possible in a child’s life. I have come across research and received feedback from experienced teachers many times about the apparent correlation between students who have poor reading skills and students who have a generally negative attitude towards reading. Many students who develop problems in learning the skills and strategies necessary to be accomplished readers seem to often develop a dislike or even a hatred of reading itself. Excessive drilling and practice of skills can considerably threaten the child’s motivation to learn to read, and can also send that child’s frustration level through the roof. Children need to explore different types of books and find the joy that they can experience through reading before they are asked to perfect the many skills that are needed to learn to read (NAEYC 158). Sitting down with a child to read from a basal text

or an uninteresting piece of literature that has no relevance to their lives or interests will not create a meaningful experience for the child, which will take away all enjoyment and any inner motivation of the child to succeed.

Setting an example for children in the home and in the classroom is very important to this aspect of the reading process. If parents encourage reading by showing children their own excitement and enjoyment about literature, the children will pick up on these feelings and may grow a love of reading similar to what their parents have demonstrated. In the classroom, many times a teacher will give students independent or quiet reading time, but this teacher will go to her desk to grade papers or do other activities. Although it does not seem like a major problem for a teacher to utilize this “free time,” the children in the classroom would be more likely to pick up on good feelings about reading if they were to see their teacher also reading silently during this time. This would make reading time feel less like school and homework time, and more like a break from the day to have an enjoyable experience. If children learn to love and treasure reading and literature before delving too deeply into decoding, phonics, and other reading strategies, then “learning to read will make as much sense as learning to ride a bike; they know that eventually it will be fun”(Huck 6).

If a teacher or parent learned about all of these issues about reading and language development and decided to take the next step, then that next step would be to determine which books are quality pieces of literature needed in the classroom and home, and which books are not. In order to do this, they would need to follow a few general guidelines about picture story books that help determine how suitable they are for young children. First, it is extremely important in these books that the text and the illustrations have a

strong correlation. This aids the early reader in figuring out what is happening in the story, even if they cannot read the words. Once they are able to begin reading the text, they can use the illustrations as a support to decode difficult words in the text (Huck 13). Our book accomplishes and goes beyond this goal because of the layout of the stanzas, the print types, and the different colorings of the words. The illustrations on each page correspond directly with the text, and the text can actually almost be seen as a part of the illustration because of the different shapes, curves, and other physical characteristics of the stanzas. An example of this is on the page where Alberto falls and grabs onto a tree. The words, “But soon he was falling” take on a downward curving form that follows the path that Alberto would have taken in his plummet. Manipulating the line of the stanza like this fully includes the text with the illustrations, bringing more meaning to both parts. Also relating to this same idea is the way we designed and manipulated certain words on each page to have similar physical characteristics as the actual meaning of the word. One example of this is the phrase “warty green heap.” The words are not only colored in a shade of green, but the word “heap” is actually in a form that resembles a hill or lump, characterizing the word perfectly to give the reader an extra hint to determine what the word could be.

Another set of important elements of picture story books are the complexities of both the plotline and the setting. For early listeners and early readers, plotlines need to be kept simple to avoid confusion among the children. Also, a quick conclusion should follow the climax of the story, as the attention and interest of the children may be lost with a lot of falling action (Huck 15). Our book hits on both of these guidelines clearly, with the main action consisting of the introduction of the characters, the chase through

the forest, and then a swift ending as Alberto the toad saves the day. Our story takes place in a forest type area that is somewhere near a city or town. This simple and general setting is easy for children to envision, as it could very easily be any park or wooded area they have visited. This makes the setting of the story meaningful to them because it brings in their own experiences to create a more vivid picture of the characters and setting.

One other basic feature of a book that can be looked at is the way the characters are developed. A quality book has realistic characters that change or grow within the story, if even by a small amount. Many of the animal characters that are depicted in children's fantasy literature tend to have human qualities and personalities. How credible and realistic this is depends upon how the author presents these characters and whether or not they have a "real" nature about them (Huck 16). I feel that our book does these things very well in that the toad, lizard, and cat are given some human qualities, but at the same time keep those that qualities that a child would expect animals like those to have. Though they giggle, scream, and chuckle, and also show fear and excitement like humans, at the same time they are very fond of munching on flies and they do eventually use their hopping, hiding, and sneaking skills to give them advantages. These characters are developed from being old and lazy to being very active with running, jumping, and saving the day! The change seems slight, but it is proportional to the actual length of this book, which would not have allowed for much more character development.

The last feature that I believe is of the utmost importance in selecting a book is the style, or how the story reads. If the language of the story is natural, smooth, and has a logical sequence to it, then the text can be seen as having high quality (Huck 18). The

words of the text can give children exposure to the creative and descriptive uses of language and can add to the overall quality of their experience with a book. Our book utilizes these features by incorporating both rhythm and rhyme within the smooth pattern of the text, and also by using a variety of descriptive words to enhance the vividness of the picture created by the story (Huck 191). Using these words encourages readers and writers to develop their vocabulary and to learn how to use new and exciting words!

The style used in this book is narrative poetry, which is a poetry form that relates an event or tells a tale (Huck 358). I chose to use this form for many reasons. One of these reasons is that hearing the rhythm and patterns created by the text can help children build upon their knowledge of how their language sounds and functions. Reading and rereading this type of text to young learners is thought to be one of the more valuable ways to build their phonemic awareness. It is almost certain to help the children grasp the concept of the sounds that words make (Rasinski 63).

Another reason why I chose narrative poetry is that young children are naturally very rhythmical people, which is why songs, chants, and nonsense verses are such popular activities during the early years of life and education. Also, the emotions represented in this story convey emotions that the readers and listeners have all experienced themselves as a part of childhood, which is partially why it becomes so meaningful to them, in turn creating a more effective learning experience (Huck 351). What makes this particular poem so enjoyable is not only that it rhymes and has a smooth rhythm, but that it also has humor, which children of every age love to hear in stories (Cooper 30).

From this sequence of rhythmical rhymes, early readers can easily develop strategies and uses for the words within the context of their reading development. It is crucial that students develop all of the basic concepts of sounds, letter-sound associations, and letter combinations that create each individual word, while at the same time realizing and experiencing the joys of reading a “good book” (Cooper 170). A good way that teachers could use this book to begin developing word part concepts is to first pull out all of the rhyming words and putting each word onto a card. If the students are more advanced readers, they can organize the different words into groups according to their sounds or their make-up. For early readers, the teacher can pair up the rhyming words next to one another and the students can identify which parts of the words are the same, and which parts are different. This gives more backing to the concept of word parts and with practice, students will more easily recognize changes from one word to the next, so when they are sight reading, fewer mistakes will be made. Doing this also incorporates the chunking strategy, which is basically the reader recognizing word patterns and looking for the largest sound chunks that they recognize (Cooper 171).

In order to create this book to meet the many needs of young readers, much research and creativity was put forth. The end product, I believe, is a high-quality piece of children’s literature that could easily become the basis of many different lessons in the classroom. I only hope that I can take what I have learned from this unique experience and effectively apply it to my own classroom and students in the future.

Artistic Content

Graphic design is a field based upon corporate image, branding, product development and advertising. Thus, the majority of training at any given time is focused mainly on the business world, dealing with the development of logos, posters, magazines and consumer products. Though some projects may allow for the chance to redirect the audience towards children, I had not yet had that opportunity. I was inspired to collaborate on this book due to my desire to address my work to a younger audience. I felt that this would give me the chance to work in a different format and style, and lead to a broadening of my professional horizons. I was greatly influenced by the illustrations of Leo Lionni in *An Extraordinary Egg* and *Tuesday* by David Wiesner and inspired to develop the unique vision of this book. My goal was to incorporate my fine arts skill in drawing with my knowledge of typography and layout, creating a book that not only helps children learn but also entertains and inspires them.

“In a picture book that tells a story, the message is conveyed through two media – picture and word. In a well-designed book in which the total format reflects the meaning of the story, both the illustrations and the text must bear the burden of narration. The pictures help tell the story, showing the action and expressions of the characters, the changing settings, and the development of the plot” (Huck 168). This idea was kept in mind throughout the process of developing the artistic content of our book. With the overall story in mind, and the knowledge of the need for a continuous flow of action parallel to the story line, each image is created in a way that enhances the development of the action and engages the reader in the story.

The first area that we addressed was the overall style of the illustrations. There were several elements that we took into consideration: the fact that our main characters were animals, the overall feel of the story and the appropriateness of the images for young children. Because the story describes the adventures of a lizard and a toad, we felt that the best route combined a realistic approach with a cartoon style. This would give the characters a sense of emotion and action throughout the story while at the same time rendering the animals in a way that would allow children to recognize them in comparison with their living counterparts. To achieve this goal, it was necessary to research the body structures of lizards, toads and cats before beginning to draw. The characters are based on photographs of live animals, and the cartoon style is achieved through the simplification of their forms. Black lines enclose each shape in order to enable the reader to distinguish various elements from the background more easily. These lines also flatten out the space in a manner consistent with the cartoon style.

Once the style of illustration was chosen, we had to choose a medium. Keeping in mind that “the illustrator’s choice of original media can be as important to the meaning of the book as the choice of the elements of art”, we chose to render our illustrations using colored pencil (Huck 176). Colored pencil is easy to work with when compared to more involved media such as oil or watercolors, and provides a unique texture that is not achieved with either type of paint. The pencil texture holds its quality throughout the process of scanning and printing, and adds flair to the drawings. Colored pencils also come in a variety of vibrant colors. Given the action and the happy ending of the book, the vibrant colors both harmonize with and enhance the overall quality of the story and maintain our desire for a cartoon style combined with elements of realism. In order to

remain true to realism, appropriate colors were used for each character or element. For example, the toad is green and brown, the cat tabby and the lizard brown and red, all of which are similar to the coloring of these animals in real life. While the colored pencil allowed the blending of colors in a more realistic manner, the basic color palette remains true to our desire for a cartoon style and is parallel to their simplified yet realistic forms.

The third element of the illustrations is their layout. The story describes the animals as they watch people walk down the road, eat their lunch, take a nap, run away from a cat and achieve a miraculous escape. Because “pictures not only should reflect the action and climax of the plot, they should help create the basic mood of the story”, it was necessary that the illustrations both continue and enhance the story (Huck 170). “One way to obtain action in what might otherwise be a static series of pictures is to change the focus, just as a movie camera changes perspective or shows close-ups and then moves back to pan the whole scene” (Huck 175). This was the basic inspiration for the layout of the illustrations. On each page, the action of the stanza is brought to life in pictorial form, and the perspective is shifted. Some pages are designed to place the focus on Leonard and Alberto, others are seen from their perspective, and still others are seen as from a third party. There are also several images that either isolate the individual focused on in the stanza or crop the images in interesting and unique ways. This technique not only gives life to the action of the story but also keeps the images fresh and interesting to the reader.

The final element of the illustrations is the use of white, or negative space. Large amounts of negative space are present on each page, separated and defined by the black lines encircling each object. The idea behind this approach is threefold. First, the negative space adds to the flat feel of the cartoon style. It provides a clean, uncluttered background

against which the action takes place. Secondly, the stark white of the background allows the colors to jump out from the page. They appear more vibrant and exciting when placed on a white background, rather than when competing with more color. And third, the negative space provides a clear area in which the text can be placed, allowing for greater ease of reading and more freedom with the placement and style of type.

The second area addressed in the creation of this book was the layout and format of the text. With the knowledge that “the type should enhance or extend the overall design of the book” (Huck 191) and that “anyone looking at a printed page will be influenced, within a split second of making eye contact, by everything on the page: the arrangement of various elements as well as the individual look of each one” (Spiekermann 37), we decided to create a free-flowing layout that would be consistent with the energetic and upbeat story. Laying out the stanzas in a non-uniform manner enhanced the actions of the story and the images, while at the same time helping lead the reader through each page and on to the next. At times, the lines of text mimic or delineate the implied action of the characters, which adds a sense of movement as determined by the flow of the eye through the text and across the page.

Though most type fonts are very standardized, “if you look closely at a letter, you can see personality expressed in its physical characteristics (Spiekermann 43). For this reason, it is very important to pay close attention to the type used, as certain fonts express certain emotions. In order to enhance this story, different fonts and colors are utilized to emphasize certain words and strengthen their meaning. For example, the word “giggle” is given a script-like text and bright color, which directly relates to the feel of the word.

Another example is the word “creeping”, which is placed in a more non-uniform and choppy font, relating to its unsettling aspects.

The final area addressed was the layout of the book as a whole. Though often overlooked when examining the content of a book, the layout can have a great impact on its overall impact. The first and most basic element of a book is its size. The small size of our book is more conducive to a children’s book as it is more to the scale of a child, making it easier to hold. Also, the scale reflects the narrow focus of the story and the size of the characters. Toads and lizards are not larger than life, nor are the events described in the story unusual or unbelievable. In fact, toads and lizards are very small, and their adventure was relatively short. Thus, the size of their book reflects the basic elements of their story.

The story is also reflected in the horizontal layout of the book and its pages. Throughout the book, all of the action occurs close to the ground. Moreover, the animals are short creatures who live on the ground. The horizontal layout of the book places emphasis on both the horizontal flow of action, as when Leonard and Alberto run along the ground to escape the cat, and reflect the idea of a horizon line.

Another often overlooked aspect of the overall layout are the endpapers. Endpapers are the pages inside the cover, which the reader sees upon opening the book. “Decorated endpapers can reflect the setting, the theme, or the content of the book and serve as a special invitation into the book” (Huck 190). While we wanted the endpapers to reflect the story and invite the reader in, we did not want to simply repeat an illustration from the book itself. For this reason they are decorated with a lively and entertaining pattern composed of multicolored flies. This repeats imagery from both the

cover and the body of the illustrations, and harmonizes well with the animals involved in the story. The flies on the front endpaper also blend well with the flies on the title page, and give the entire book a sense of continuity.

Finally, the cover itself is of great importance. “The primary purpose of the [cover] is to call attention to the book” (Huck 188). This prompted us to choose an image that was both vibrantly colored and inviting to the reader. We felt that both main characters should be included on the cover, as they are the focus of the book and are specifically named in the title. Leonard and Alberto are placed relative to their names in the title, that is, from left to right as it reads. This way, readers will not be confused about which character is which before reading the book. We felt that the back cover could be less specific to the overall content of the book, but should still reflect some of its aspects. Thus the image gives a glimpse of the unique cropping and perspectives of the illustrations, and also creates a sense of action and merriment.

The creation of this book was a unique application of my design skills. It was my first opportunity to create work geared towards children, and also the first book that I collaborated on, making the experience an in depth exercise of my knowledge of design principles. Though experienced in working with type, its layout and innovative arrangements, the focus audience required that it be kept logical and legible. A consistent style of both text layout and illustration throughout the book unifies it as a whole. I applied my knowledge of color theory to the illustrations, making them vibrant and colorful in accordance with the overall qualities of the story. My knowledge of composition and page design was also in use throughout the entire process, from laying out the initial illustrations to organizing the text on each page. During this process, I

utilized my skills in working with Adobe Photoshop and QuarkXPress. In addition, I had the opportunity to refresh my skill in drawing, something not always needed in design during this age of computer graphics. It was refreshing to combine hand drawn art with computer technology, creating a unified product. And finally, because this project was a group effort, I was able to practice my skills in working with a client and problem solving, discovering my partner's vision for the book and then applying my knowledge to the problem, making it a reality.

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